MUSEUMS AND THE BLIND

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N.I.B. BULLETIN No. 1.

EMPLOYMENT OF THE BLIND.

EMPLOYMENT OF BLIND PERSONS IN ORDINARY FACTORIES AND WORKSHOPS.

SUB-CONTRACTING AS A MEANS OF FINDING NEW OCCUPATIONS.

PRICE 3d.

Museums and the Blind.

THE London Telephone Directory gives a list of twenty-two museums in the metropolis; all large towns have one or more, and enquiry shows that many small towns have their collections; there is something indeed specially attractive about the smaller Museum, with its stress on local records and the homely domesticities of our own ancestors. Whether some of us make proper use of this most fascinating way of learning history is, of course, another question; but at least there are many museums available for us if we will, with vast store-houses of treasure.

Rather more than twenty years ago, Mr. J. A. Charlton Deas, the Director of the Sunderland Museum, Art Gallery, and Libraries, in conversation with a blind Council School teacher, was impressed by his comments on the difficulty of developing the imagination of blind children. As a matter of theory, they knew for example that the model of a cow that was shown to them was one-fortieth of the size of the real animal; but when they were asked to indicate the size of the cow, they stooped down and described something more like a kitten. "I see men . . . as trees, walking," sounds fantastic to the seeing man, but to him who reflects for a moment it comes down through the ages with all the vivid impress of an overheard remark.

As a result of his conversation with his blind friend, Mr. Deas decided to arrange a course of demonstrations on five Sunday afternoons, and these were attended by 20 to 25 blind people. The first demonstration was confined to the Art Gallery, and later ones to the Museum, when special attention was given to natural history exhibits.

A report by Mr. Deas appeared in "The Museums Journal," September, 1913, and as a supplement to

"Hora Jucunda" in October, 1913. A detailed account of his methods was given, which may be briefly recapitulated here. The demonstrations were preceded by a short and simply worded lecture by an expert, and "were never over-loaded with scientific expression . . . only sufficient to whet the curiosity and make the audience eager to make a close examination of the specimens." The first of the four Museum lectures dealt with animals, the second with reptiles, the third with birds and birds' nests, and the fourth with miscellaneous objects, including prehistoric implements, models of a locomotive, rowing boats, lifeboats, aeroplanes, and balloons, and a number of busts of celebrated men. Each blind visitor was allotted a guide, whose duty it was to see that the person in his charge had a reasonable opportunity of handling each exhibit thoroughly, and who read aloud the descriptive label attached to each specimen, supplementing the information given thereon if necessary. In order to ensure that each visitor examined every object, a list of exhibits was pinned to the coat of the blind person, and each exhibit struck off when it had been examined. Stress is rightly laid by Mr. Deas on the responsibility of the work entrusted to the guides, who must be persons imaginative enough to realise the importance of thorough handling, intelligent enough to describe each feature at the moment it is touched, and unfailingly patient.

The Sunday lectures were confined to adults, but the same programme was followed during week-day lectures and demonstrations for school-children. In order to impress the objects handled on the memories of the children, they were encouraged to make clay models from memory, and some of these, which illustrate the article in "The Museums Journal," are amazing in their fidelity; the model of a bear, made by a totally blind girl of fourteen some weeks after her visit to the Museum, is marked by a freshness and virility that are extraordinary, especially when we are told that she had never before handled clay.

Of the comments made upon objects examined, Mr. Deas writes that they were "interesting, occasionally amusing, but never absurd." He quotes from the letter of a blind man, and part of the quotation is worth reproducing here:—"It is the want of vivid and approximately correct mental standards or mental pictures which makes it so difficult for the blind to produce successfully neat and well-made articles. . . . The appeals you have made to their fancy and imaginative power have disarranged and overturned what I may describe as previous conceptions. Contact with nature and her works shows them what is, and what is possible. Where there was darkness and lack of form, there are now struggling notions of shape and size. The very effort to bring cohesion out of empty void must quicken and strengthen our mental powers." The same letter goes on to give an interesting and lively description of the effect upon the writer of various objects examined. "Some things," he writes, "give me a feeling of beauty and grace, while others give me a feeling of annoyance and distaste. Other blind people are the same. The stork disappointed me, but the flamingo aroused my admiration. The penguin suggested oddity and the commonplace, and also the grotesque. I could have laughed out-right! I saw in childhood a woman who called up the same feeling."

In concluding his account of the demonstrations, Mr. Deas adds that the objects, which numbered in all between two and three hundred, were handled with care and consideration, and nothing was soiled or broken, except three duplicate eggs of a common type. Mr. Deas's experience in this respect should prove reassuring to other curators disposed to follow his example. The work is now a regular feature at intervals in Sunderland.

The experiment there has been described in some detail, as Sunderland was the pioneer in the movement; its example has since been followed in London, Liver-

pool, Edinburgh, and other large towns in England. Scotland and abroad. In America the New York Museum of Natural History has a special department for the blind. As far as Schools for the Blind are concerned, it is probable that Museum visits play a part in most curricula, though it was rather surprising to be told recently that the Science Museum at Kensington, which appears ideal for the blind visitor, had up to then had no organised visits from Blind Schools, though school-children, both in organised parties and individually " on their own " are among the most frequent and appreciative visitors to the Museum. School museums, of course, also frequently exist where, when space permits, a special room in the school building is set aside for models and specimens. In connection with this, it is interesting to learn that some Museums will, if application is made to them, often consider making a gift to schools of duplicates of specimens of interest, though not of intrinsic value. Big-game hunters and travellers are also sometimes ready to help schools by gifts of specimens.

But schools for the blind need not greatly concern us here ; their teaching staffs are bodies of alert men and women, quick to grasp every opportunity of widening the outlook and interests of the children in their care. What perhaps needs to be considered in greater detail is the question whether the Sunderland experiments of showing museum exhibits to the adult blind cannot be more widely imitated.

To-day, the very large class of so-called " unemployable blind " is generally exposed to far less financial insecurity than in the past. Local authorities in most areas have awakened to their responsibilities and the incomes of these blind people are being made up to a reasonable level. Of course, so long as food, rent, firing, and clothing are matters of daily anxiety and uncertainty, blind men and women have little heart to look beyond these prosaic but vital details, but now that the strain of living on the edge of extreme

poverty has in many instances been removed they are freer to realise that " man does not live by bread alone " and to turn their thoughts to outside interests and cultivate a wider outlook. It is the special work of the Home Teacher to foster this interest in outside things, and to lead the blind person away from the dangers of introspection into a wider and fuller life.

There is always a danger lest the Home Teacher shall develop, as grants to the unemployable blind become more general, into a mere investigator and almoner, and so cease to be a teacher at all. It is so fatally easy for the busy secretaries of voluntary associations, cumbered about as they are with much filling in of official forms and compilation of many statistics, to delegate more and more of the routine enquiry work to the Home Teacher, who may, if care be not taken, become little more than a Public Assistance officer.

And even where the Home Teacher really deserves that name, and is still regarded as someone whose duty it is to teach, and to give healthy occupation to those whose interests tend to become woefully narrow, there is still another pitfall. Every Home Teacher, however zealous, is confronted from time to time with that horrid bogey " disposal of goods." The Teacher is urged to encourage the blind who are visited to occupy their leisure in knitting, light basketry, rug-making, raffia-work, and so forth, but no voluntary organisation can afford to supply an unlimited amount of material for making these goods. Indifferently-made articles often accumulate at a depressingly rapid rate, and to sell them as " Made by the Blind " is open to the serious criticism that if they are of second-rate quality they may be purchased by a charitable public out of pity, and so drag down the standard of blind craftsmanship, while if they are of workshop-standard they compete with the goods turned out by the registered Home Worker, who is dependent on his handicraft for his livelihood, and should not

be forced to compete with the pastime worker. More and more we are driven to the conclusion that the only escape from the dilemma lies in the direction of the Home Teacher using every effort to give the blind in his care an occupation that will keep the mind healthily and happily employed, without adding unduly to the stock of hand-made goods.

It is just here that the showing of Museums to the blind may offer some contribution to a solution of the problem. Of course, intellectual interests do not make an appeal to every unemployable blind person, or even to the majority, but everyone who has worked as a Home Teacher knows that equally the pursuit of a handicraft makes only a very limited appeal. It is true, too, that every Home Teacher has neither the taste nor the capacity to urge intellectual pursuits. At the same time, there are in the Home Teaching world men and women who are "born teachers," and who find that merely to teach handicrafts is unsatisfying; they long to share with their blind friends the intellectual interests which form so large a part of their own lives. Opportunities exist to-day for furthering such a scheme as were undreamed of even ten years ago; one has only to glance through the pages of "The Radio Times" to see, for example, what tremendous opportunities are offered by means of wireless. "Peoples and Lands of the British Empire," the broadcasts by travellers in the Broadcast to Schools section, "The Dark Continent," "Talks from Abroad," "The Food Supply and the Future"—all these are titles full of suggestion. The Home Teacher who could be set free in some measure from that "serving of tables" which sometimes threatens to engulf the work to-day, and be allowed instead to do something to satisfy that hunger of men and women which can never be met by any occupation which keeps the fingers busy but leaves the mind unfed, would be doing a piece of really valuable work.

At the end of this Bulletin a list is appended of Museums whose Directors have either already opened

their Museums to the blind, or are prepared to consider doing so, and it may therefore be useful in conclusion to indicate quite shortly the line that could be taken by a Home Teacher in arranging a visit. It must of course always be remembered by Home Teachers that Directors of Museums are busy people, often working with a small staff of assistants, and that every effort should be made, in applying for permission to bring a party of blind persons, to give reasonable notice, and exact details of the numbers likely to be present ; the visits of the blind may entail considerable extra work on the part of the Museum staff and are arranged as an act of courtesy, which should be properly appreciated by those who benefit from it.

The Teacher should approach the Director, seeing him personally if possible, and ask his advice as to the objects that may most usefully and conveniently be examined by touch. He should then enlist the interest and sympathy of voluntary workers who will act as guides during the visit, one to each blind person being the ideal, as suggested in Mr. Deas's article, and he will if possible pay a preliminary visit to the Museum with his guides, in order that they may gain some familiarity with the objects to be shown. If the guides are not experienced in dealing with blind people, they might be introduced to Mr. Deas's " Dozen Dont's in Dealing with the Blind," available in printed form, gratis. If an ally has been found in the Director, he may be willing to help in drawing up a description of the objects to be seen, and by setting aside a special official on the day of the visit, who will take general charge of the party, and give an introductory talk. Bringing the blind visitors to the Museum may offer some practical difficulties, but if a Saturday afternoon visit can be arranged, Girl Guides or Boy Scouts may sometimes be able to help in this way, and it is, after all, no more difficult to escort a blind man to and from a Museum than to a Social Club. It may be necessary for the Home Teacher to exercise a certain firmness in disposing of the escorts while the tour of exhibits

is in process, persuading them to go off on their own, if accommodation is limited, and there is danger of the blind party being overweighted.

Those blind people who are inclined at first to suspect that a visit to a Museum must be rather dreary and improving, may be persuaded to change their minds if they are told something of the contents of such a collection as that housed in the Science Museum, Kensington, where working models of locomotives, Amy Johnson's " Jason I," galleries showing the evolution of the sailing ship from 3000 B.C. to the present time, and an exhibit dealing with the development of radio communication, are arranged in a way that must stir the imagination of the dullest of us.

Careful " stage-management " is essential if visits to Museums are to be a success ; but it is work well worth while attempting. Adult education classes by means of Braille correspondence are already doing much to stimulate intellectual interests among the blind, but there are many who find such education by correspondence rather a " lonely furrow " and who need to be stimulated by the living voice, human contact, the exchange of ideas, and the handling of tangible things. It is for these that visits to museums may do much, in breaking down that sense of isolation which is often one of the heaviest burdens that blindness imposes.

List of Museums prepared to offer facilities to the Blind.

Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham.

Corporation Art Gallery and Museum, Cartwright Memorial Hall, Bradford.

Public Library, Museums, and Fine Art Galleries, Brighton.

Museum and Art Gallery, Bristol.

National Museum of Wales; Cardiff.

Public Library, Museum, and Art Gallery, Carlisle.

Edward Pease Public Library and Museum, Crown Street, Darlington.

Museum and Art Gallery, Derby.

Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.

Bankfield Museum, Halifax.

Public Library, Gray Art Gallery and Museum, West Hartlepool.

Tolson Memorial Museum, Huddersfield.

The Municipal Museums, Hull.

City Museum, Park Row, Leeds.

Museum and Art Gallery, New Walk, Leicester.

Free Public Museums, William Brown Street, Liverpool.

British Museum, London, W.C.1.

Imperial Institute, South Kensington, S.W.7.

Natural History Museum, South Kensington, S.W.7.

Science Museum, South Kensington, S.W.7.

The Manchester Museum, Manchester.

The Borough Museum, Newbury.

Hancock Museum, Barras Bridge, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Corporation Museum and Art Gallery, Dock Street, Newport, Mon.

Castle Museum, Norwich.

Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.

Museum, Art Gallery, and Cottonian Collection, Plymouth.
Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight.
Public Museum and Art Gallery, Reading.
Art Gallery and Museum, Rochdale.
Royal Museum and Art Galleries, Peel Park, Salford.
Salisbury, South Wilts, and Blackmore Museum, Salisbury.
Philosophical and Archæological Society Museum, Scarborough.
Museum and Art Gallery, Weston Park, Sheffield.
Public Libraries and Museum, Prittlewell Priory, Southend-on-Sea.
Public Libraries, Museum, and Art Gallery, Sunderland.
Royal Institution of South Wales, Swansea.
City Museum and Art Gallery, Holmfield House, Wakefield.
The Museum, Worcester.

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